

New York judge orders Fordham University to recognize Students for Justice in Palestine club

By Fred Mazelis
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In a decision announced early this week, a New York judge found that Fordham University had violated free speech rights, as well as its own rules, by denying official recognition to a student organization that supports the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, the lobbying and protest campaign against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and oppression of the Palestinian people.

Justice Nancy Bannon of the State Supreme Court said that the denial of club status to the chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) was “arbitrary and capricious.”

The legal outcome follows a lengthy campaign by Fordham students and supporters, stretching over more than two years, in which they were represented by the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) and Palestine Legal.

The SJP application for club status was approved by the student government in 2016, but the dean of students at the Catholic university, which has campuses in the Bronx and Manhattan as well as in Westchester County just north of the city, vetoed the decision on openly political grounds. The dean declared in a letter at that time that “the narrowness of Students for Justice in Palestine’s political focus makes it more akin to a lobbying group than a student club.”

“I cannot support an organization whose sole purpose is advocating political goals of a specific group, and against a specific country, when these goals clearly conflict with and run contrary to the mission and values of the university,” the dean stated.

The judge, in her 21-page decision, said the argument that SJP targets a specific country could also be used against China, Russia and other governments whose

policies have provoked opposition. She said the administration’s decision was inconsistent with its own rules and that it gave no reason for its action other than the political views of the students fighting for Palestinian rights.

Using the Fordham administration’s reasoning, what would prevent the denial of a club status to a socialist club on the grounds that its program is “anti-American”?

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) has had its own experiences in facing roadblocks to campus club recognition. Two and a half years ago, the Student Activities Board at New York University denied the IYSSE official status but did not acknowledge any political motive. Club recognition was only achieved after a year-long campaign by students at NYU.

The judge’s decision, which the university may appeal, is a small but significant blow against the campaign by the Netanyahu government in Israel, in the closest collaboration with the Trump administration, with bipartisan support, to delegitimize all criticism of Zionism as anti-Semitic. Huge resources are being plowed into this effort, especially in Western Europe as well as North America. In Britain, its major focus has been the campaign against the Corbyn leadership and critics of Zionism within the Labour Party.

In the US the defamation campaign has received the backing of both major political parties of American capitalism, with Democrats competing with Republicans to prove their support for Zionism.

Most US states, including many controlled by the Democrats, have passed “anti-BDS” laws, which

forbid state employees or contractors from doing business with any entity that supports Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions.

It should also be noted that, while the Israeli press covered the judge's decision on Fordham, there has been no report on it in the local New York press, including the "liberal" *New York Times* and the right-wing Rupert Murdoch-owned *New York Post*.

The BDS movement does not go beyond the bounds of protest, seeking to influence the ruling class and the political establishment in order to pressure Israel to change its policies. Calls for academic and cultural boycotts play into the hands of the Zionists. However, the right-wing campaign against supporters of BDS, designed to smear all critics of Zionism, must be resolutely fought.

The attempt to officially conflate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism turns reality and history on its head, since it is the Israeli ruling class that has evicted Palestinians from their homes and defended a state based on ethnic exclusivism. The government under Netanyahu more and more seeks out and collaborates with fascistic elements like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and US President Donald Trump.

Last April US authorities denied entry to the country to Omar Barghouti, the cofounder of the BDS movement. Continuing these efforts, the US State Department has now revised its definition of anti-Semitism, according to the Middle East Monitor website, to include "drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis." This new example comes on the heels of 10 other illustrations officially presented by the Trump administration. "Claiming that the existence of the State of Israel is a racist endeavor" is now regarded as anti-Jewish.

Thus, campaigning for a state in which Arabs and Jews live together and share equal rights is enough to brand one as an anti-Semite.

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